

Education Cabinet

National Library Week Op-Ed - Building Community: Traditional or Virtual, Libraries Thrive in All Dimensions

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Are books passé? Have library stacks been outpaced by memory sticks? Are large echo-laden library halls just for get-togethers?

Some would say our libraries are obsolete, a quaint vestige of our past. This is not a view held by anyone who has visited a library lately. Use of Kentucky libraries continues to increase dramatically every year, serving more people in more ways than ever before.

April 13-19 is the 50th anniversary of National Library Week, a time when libraries of all types and the people who use them come together with the American Library Association to celebrate the contributions of all libraries, librarians and library workers in our nation's schools, campuses and communities. It is also a great opportunity to get to know the library of the 21st century. This year's theme, Join the Circle of Knowledge @ Your Library, is an invitation to do just that.

By using a variety of approaches to meet customers expressed needs and offering programs and services that offer something for everyone, libraries today have transformed not only themselves but the communities that they serve. Public, school, college and university libraries are flourishing not only within the physical confines of bricks and mortar, steel and glass, but also in the continuously expanding Internet universe. Rather than threatening our libraries, the age of technology has complemented libraries' services and expanded their reach.

Today's libraries bridge the computer and technology divide. Kentucky public libraries provide free Internet access and over 2,900 public access computers. For many who don't have computers or high-speed Internet access at home, our public libraries make the difference between decent wages and economic disenfranchisement.

The facts speak for themselves: library use is up nationwide. More than 2 billion items were checked out last year, and librarians serve nearly 1.8 billion visitors annually. In Kentucky over 2 million people hold library cards. Last year alone, more than 1 million people participated in children's programs across the commonwealth. This success speaks to the fact that libraries are about more than information and data sharing. Libraries are about community.

At the library, people from diverse backgrounds can come together for meetings and lectures, do research with personalized assistance, apply for jobs or get homework help. Free computer classes for youth through seniors are offered, as well as summer reading programs for children, teens and adults, and workshops on topics from ice sculpture to photography to effective parenting. Trained information professionals – librarians – foster inquiry, assist with interpretation of information both onsite and online, and support the education and literacy efforts of the educational community. Given all of this, it's easy to see why libraries have become vital community centers.

Additionally, libraries are leading the way in forging creative public-private charitable partnerships with a new generation of supporters like the Bill & Melinda Gates Library Foundation, this year celebrating 11 years of major financial support for computer equipment, software and training at our nation's libraries.

These efforts aren't simply charitable. Education and literacy are essential to staying competitive in a global society. Recent studies indicate we've got some serious distance to travel.

More than eight million American children, grades 4-12, struggle to read, write and comprehend on the most basic levels, according to federal studies, and only three out of 10 eighth-graders are reading at or above grade level, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Society as a whole pays, according to the National Governors Association, whose "Reading to Achieve" report indicates that deficits in basic literacy skills drain as much as \$16 million annually from businesses, universities and under-educated workers themselves in lost productivity and other costs.

Libraries are part of the solution. According to a recent study by the University of Kentucky Survey Research Center, nine out of 10 people saw libraries as a "key educational asset in the community" and agreed that libraries help people learn new things.

Research in 14 states has found that students with well-developed school libraries consistently score 10-18 percent higher on reading and other tests. Librarians help students conduct research, either in person or online through "ask-a-librarian" services. In fact, they answer almost 73 million reference questions each year – about twice the attendance at college football games.

Libraries and librarians are more relevant than ever, providing a 24/7 information delivery service. Our multi-faceted, multicultural, multilingual resources are providing a path to their best conceivable future for millions nationwide. And, of course, admission is free.